

Brooks scientist, Garcia, crusades for child transplants

by Rudy Purificato, 311th Human Systems Wing

BROOKS AFB, TEXAS

— After what may have seemed like an eternity, a 7-month-old girl who had been “adopted” by a Brooks scientist recently received a liver transplant.

“She had been at University Hospital for weeks awaiting a transplant. I thought she was probably not going to make it,” said Dr. Sharon Garcia, research psychologist for the Air Force Research Laboratory Human Effectiveness Directorate’s Warfighter Training Division.

As a board of director’s member for the nonprofit group Transplants for Children, Garcia knows too well the reality that exists for children awaiting transplants.

Since TFC’s inception, 56 children have died while awaiting transplants. Another 31 children did not survive medical complications following transplantations. According to TFC officials, some children wait an average three to four years for a kidney. Last year, an 18-year-old who had waited 13 years for a kidney died from a stroke. For those who receive single organ transplants, the survival rate is 80 percent.

Garcia’s ‘transplant’ child, part of a TFC program in which families with children needing or having had transplants are ‘adopted,’ is among the few lucky ones. She was near death when she received part of a liver donated by the family of a 15-year-old boy who had been killed in a car accident.

“When you’re a kid, you don’t understand the complexity of life when it goes wrong,” Garcia said. This can also be true for many families of children needing transplants when they discover the overwhelming requirements associated with prolonged, life-threatening illness.



SHARON'S FRIENDS — The group of children pictured have received successful organ transplants. Dr. Sharon Garcia, a research psychologist for the Human Effectiveness Directorate of the Air Force Research Laboratory is a board member for the nonprofit group Transplants for Children, a group that works to ensure children like the ones pictured receive much needed transplants.

It was such a dilemma that prompted Eric and Sharon Sutton in 1986 to organize TFC in San Antonio following their unsuccessful efforts to secure a liver transplant for their young son. The Sutton’s tragedy has since evolved into a beacon of hope for hundreds of South Texas families. The Combined Federal Campaign organization’s primary purpose is to help fulfill the needs of transplant children and their families.

“When a transplant family comes to us, we recognize their needs are going to be continuous. We make a commitment to that family, keeping them in our care [if needed] up until the child is 18 years old,” Garcia said.

Among the services TFC provide are financial assistance for transplant-related expenses, trust fund management, parent support through individual and group counseling, advocacy in insurance matters, crisis funding to meet extraordinary expenses, transportation and temporary housing assistance.

Garcia said, “These families are financially strapped as a result of their children’s illnesses.” TFC’s crisis fund provides money to meet families’ ‘life survival’ needs.

“We use the money to help them purchase prescriptions. Medicaid and insurance doesn’t cover some of a child’s medications.”

She cited one case last year where TFC bought a special formula costing \$60 for a boy to gain weight while awaiting a liver transplant. Family needs run the gamut from food to money for rent. TFC covers these and other extraordinary expenses.

“We don’t turn any families away. There’s no other organization in San Antonio that I’m aware of that caters specifically to the issue of child [organ] transplants. There are other organizations that help chronically ill children such as ‘Any Baby Can,’ but they are not set up for continuous

care,” Garcia said. TFC distinguishes itself from these organizations through its commitment to continuous care to adulthood.

Garcia, a bone marrow donor since 1986, said TFC currently helps 240 families. Her commitment to TFC is rooted in childhood when her father, Richard Garcia, was permanently incapacitated following a near fatal car accident in 1968. “We were overwhelmed by the response from our community [in Houston]. I know how important it was for my family to have the support of friends and the community,” she said. The outpouring of goodwill left a lasting impression on Garcia who has devoted a lifetime giving back to those in need. @